

Activist Media Making

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by Julia Lesage

It is a great honor to be speaking to you today on the subject of media activism, a topic dear to my heart. My references will be to the conditions of media making in the United States. You listeners will have to decide for yourselves which of my observations and lessons drawn from experience might be applied to your own situation, since I hope this talk will stimulate some of you to become lifelong media activists.

Making activist media usually means making documentaries, and likely now, documentary videos. In making video intended to support and promote social change, director must keep two conceptual goals in mind. First, the video has to reveal social structures and teach how to apply this knowledge about those previously hidden structures. This is because social and psychological structures last for a long time, often centuries. Women, for example, need a knowledge of patriarchal structures because they need to organize to change those structures; that is the only way to have a lasting effect on large scale institutions such as law, medicine, education, or religion, and also to have a lasting effect on social process, such as the way girls and boys are raised in the family. When a documentary reveals and teaches about usually hidden social structures, the audience gets information and knowledge that it can apply to a number of social and political situations. And if the video is made well, it reveals structures in an aesthetic way that gives the documentary effectiveness over a lasting period of time.

At the same time, any documentary that only teaches about social structures flattens out the complexity of life, the variety of human nature, and the specificity of local cultures or individual lives. Contradictions always exist, and are often painful to recognize, especially by those of us who consider ourselves social activists and are calling for unity among women to create social change. In the name of unity, we may not see the variety of women among us or the very different conditions that shape different groups' lives. Furthermore I myself am very suspicious of family-of-man type documentaries which depict the extreme pathos of social oppression while protesting that oppression with the claim that "we are all basically human" or "we are all basically alike." In making social change media, we have to recognize the oppression of one group of people by another, and that some groups cause the others' problems. In the case of women working for change, if we are not aware of the contradictions between women, especially the contradictions that arise from class or social situation, we flatten out women's lives, make media that is dull and unconvincing, and limit the vision which our media presents. It is only media that embraces contradiction that is convincing and that will have an effectiveness over a number of years.

To embrace such complexity, the very process of media making has to embrace three distinct functions, usually carried out by a number of people. One person or function is that of director, who takes responsibility for the aesthetic and political vision of the videotape and sees that work gets made and distributed in an ethical and timely manner. Another function, perhaps carried out by the director or perhaps by others under the guidance of the director, is that of cinematographer and editor, the person or persons responsible for the technological excellence of the project, executing it within the financial means available for it.

The third person, and this person is crucial for the success of the project, must be an insider, working with those who will appear in the video as its subjects. If the video is based on interviews, this person has access to and the confidence of those filmed. She does the interviewing and works with the director to decide what will go in the final version of the tape. This "insider" organizer's ongoing work with the people filmed means that her analysis informs the entire interview process, and her familiarity with the people filmed as individuals means they feel comfortable talking about a whole range of issues with her that they might not have discussed in the same intimate way with the director, who may be an outsider to their world.

Doing this kind of work implies a good-faith effort on the part of all concerned, but because I have seen how media projects can fall apart when a work's makers disagree, when I direct a video project, I am careful to delineate a specific process and structure of responsibility from the planning stages on. I circulate a written statement of the project's goals and procedures, seeking to establish an open and equitable basis for dealing with all those who work on the project. I explain what releases are and that I will ask for releases for all interviews, which are to be copyright in my name. The issue of copyright is important to me as a teacher in the United States as it is the only way to guarantee that university administrators can have no control over my social activist video projects. I also tell all the support personnel working on the project that I will seek input from them up until the time of actual video production, at which point I will take control of the process through the editing stage. At the time of the final edit, I then give all the people who appear in the tape veto power over their final appearance. I send them a script of the tape if they are not able to see it in person for them to be able to make this decision.

There is a good reason for assuming and making explicit this kind of directorial authority. As a media professional and a university professor, I have the ability to make a videotape, gather assistance for its production, apply for grants, control its final structure, and prepare a plan for its distribution. Because I am committed to social action media and have reflected on some of the pitfalls that accompany a naive commitment to collaborative process, I am concerned to finish a production in a timely way and see its effective use. Because I maintain production control, I can work very economically, set deadlines, pay for most of the costs up to the on-line edit out of my own pocket, and distribute the work at no profit, making extensive use of local showings. What this means is that I create a space for others' voices to be heard in a tape that they can use, but in a production process which I establish and control. Although I give those filmed feedback mechanisms, veto power, and points of input, there are crucial points at which I make political and aesthetic decisions. My sense is that a work has to have a single aesthetic vision; and if the makers argue about its politics at the editing stage, the work often never gets finished. And what most likely gets left out, if collaborative media making decisions control the editing, are the contradictions that make the work lively and convincing, and also often make it controversial.

Finally, it seems to me that making media for social change may mean embracing consumer technology, now digital video and computer editing, and creating new forms of distribution away from television. If our goal is to publicly assert women's previously silenced realities, unacknowledged experiences, and social structures and contradictions, we cannot assume that mainstream media institutions will embrace these works that we make. In terms of my own vision, I have not aspired to "professional" budgets nor to make feature fiction films. I make low budget documentaries that do not require the monetary investment needed for "broadcast quality" television because I wish to do something under my aesthetic and political control. In particular, I have discovered the pleasure of making video with disadvantaged students in my own institution, first doing a tape with racially diverse students about race on campus, and then doing a tape with students with disabilities about their difficulties in pursuing a university education. These tapes are often shown in classrooms in the university and have been shown for a number of years now. Sometimes an African American or Asian American student will show the tape, which lays out all the issues around race on campus for the class; sometimes a teacher will show it in a writing or sociology class as a stimulus to discussion. The tapes have a life of their own and affect the place in which I work. That is personally very satisfying to me.

Using consumer technology lets us democratize media production. We can encourage community video making and media making by youth and by otherwise disadvantaged people. If we set out a production process as I have analyzed, we can teach or help special interest groups, minority groups, and those who have little money to make video. In that way,

they can use media making express their concerns, convey information or entertain in their own style. Socially there is an overarching need for us to teach others how to make video in ways other than what they see on television. Most people's formal presuppositions about film or video making come from the dominant media. If you were to hand a camera to a high school student and say, "Make a video," the student would use as a model what s/he has seen on television and in the movies. People have to learn to re-see or re-vision the elements of their environment and conceive of ways of filming that environment that will interest others. That's why social activist media making attracts me aesthetically and politically, and I hope with this talk I can encourage some of you to become activist media makers too.

I am going to show you an excerpt from a tape I made using VHS video. It was mastered in a more professional format and then distributed in VHS or home video format. Currently I am interested in making digital video and editing on a Macintosh computer with the software, Final Cut Pro. I hope you will have more questions or comments for me after our talk.